

VZCZCXRO5326
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHAK #0323/01 0581822
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 271822Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8941
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 5454
RHMFISS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEHAK/TSR ANKARA TU
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5//
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU//TCH//
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHAK/USDAO ANKARA TU
RUEUITH/TLO ANKARA TU

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000323

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT ALSO FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/26/2019

TAGS: [OSCE](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: CHP ENTERING ELECTION CAMPAIGN RUDDERLESS

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: As Turkey's local election campaign begins in earnest, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) is listless and unimaginative. Unwilling to adapt to a society less accepting of dogmatic, paternalist ideology, CHP is going to rely on tactical skirmishes to challenge the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP). So far, this ploy is not working. Absent a strategic shift, CHP's success rests not on its own efforts, but on AKP's failure. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The CHP is the party of Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and is perceived as the bastion of modernity and secularism in a world -- as perceived by the roughly 15 percent of the population that forms the core of the CHP -- full of the horrors of ethnic separatists, religious radicals, and backward-looking reactionaries. Nominally a party of the left, the CHP has been a nationalist entity closed to creativity and innovation for at least a decade, and its ideological rigidity has forced it to become entirely reactive to AKP's popular, creative policies. What creativity does arise within the party either has to conceal itself well or risk expulsion, as was the fate of the young and dynamic Istanbul politician, Mustafa Sarigul (now a member of the Democratic Left Party, DSP). As a result, the majority of our contacts, among them some stolid CHP politicians, say the party has failed to present itself as a viable alternative to the AKP.

FAILURE TO UNIFY THE LEFT

¶3. (C) As the search for candidates began in late 2008, the press and our contacts were buzzing with the possibility that the left would unify -- or cooperate, at the very least -- in the 2009 local elections. But discussions to reach such an agreement bogged down in the details. CHP, seeing itself as the natural leader of the left, wanted smaller leftist parties to come under the CHP name. The smaller parties, such as the Social-Democratic People's Party (SHP) and the Democratic Left Party (DSP), feared that being absorbed into the CHP would dilute their brand and limit their independence. They preferred that the other leftist parties abstain from running in municipalities where one party is especially strong. With no agreement reached on a broad scale, it is only in Ankara that the leftist parties agreed to unify their support for Murat Karayalcin, the former SHP

chairman who joined CHP specifically for the elections. With multiple leftist candidates running in most districts, the left-wing vote may be splintered enough that the CHP could lose close races in Izmir and Trabzon and DSP incumbents could lose cities like Eskisehir and Bartin.

FAILURE TO REACH THE PEOPLE

14. (C) Despite its claims to represent the Turkish everyman, the CHP appeals mostly to an ideological intellectual elite whose role is to protect the state from the irrational and potentially dangerous demands of the common man. These airs of superiority make it difficult for CHP's leadership to communicate with voters outside the cosmopolitan cities and Aegean coast. Some members of the party confide to us that the CHP suffers seriously at the polls because of this approach. Mesut Deger, a CHP MP from Diyarbakir, points to the debate over the new State-run Kurdish television station, TRT-6, as a case in point. Instead of embracing the reality of a multi-cultural Turkey, CHP's leadership reflexively portrayed the station as the government strengthening ethnic divisions within the country, giving the impression to voters that CHP sees Kurdish culture as antithetical to the interests of Turkey. CHP "missed a big opportunity" in failing to change its confrontational stance against a wider acceptance of Kurdishness, Deger says, and effectively ceded southeastern Turkey to AKP and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP). An attempt to seize an opportunity, however, proved to be just as fruitless as sticking to ideology. CHP's outreach to pious Muslims -- made in the

ANKARA 00000323 002 OF 003

dramatic acceptance of chador-clad women into the party -- was initially viewed with skepticism by a broad band of the voting public. It also caused a public row within the party, in which the stalwart secular wing accused Baykal in the press of betraying the very fundamentals of party ideology. The whole effort fizzled when the women resigned as a group from the party, protesting that their preferred candidate for mayor of Eyyup district of Istanbul was not selected to run.

15. (C) In a February 23 meeting with us, CHP's Sivas provincial chairman, Bulent Deniz, concurred that the CHP has played its outreach card badly. He pointed out that the opposition as a whole has made political missteps, which have made it difficult to present itself as an alternative to the AKP. However, he lamented that the CHP doesn't have the energy of AKP, failing not only in ideological but also in physical outreach to the people. He is concerned that the CHP does not use the internet effectively to reach voters. He also complained that though Prime Minister Erdogan has already held election rallies in Sivas, Adiyaman, and Diyarbakir, Deniz Baykal had not yet visited a single province on the campaign trail -- not even Izmir or Trabzon, traditional CHP strongholds that AKP is threatening to overturn.

THE POSSIBLE CAMPAIGN TO COME

16. (C) Despite all the shortcomings and failures to date, there is nonetheless an occasional glimmer in the darkness that is CHP's political strategy. In past years, CHP has been reticent to reach out to the Embassy; recently, we have received requests for meetings. CHP MP Gaye Erbatur told us that this is an initiative of the core leadership to better present CHP to the diplomatic community and to correct rampant misconceptions that CHP is obstructive and xenophobic. Baykal also visited European Union officials in Brussels in early February, presenting a Eurofriendly face in contrast to his outspoken opposition to much of the AKP's EU reform program and to Cyprus negotiations. In conversations with us, Baykal outlined rhetoric that sounded like a potential campaign speech: in criticizing AKP's lack of transparency, lack of respect for an independent press, and

alleged corruption, he asked, "Is Turkey closer to Europe today? Are its social values stronger? Is it more democratic, or is it becoming something else?"

¶17. (C) But Baykal failed in his conversations with us to put any meat on these rhetorical bones. He claimed that the CHP could not create a new reality, and the current reality is that the Turkish public sees more success than failure in AKP policies. AKP has been able to shape public opinion with the use of the organs of state in a way that CHP cannot. He also coyly suggested that the West makes his job difficult; when the EU and the US fail to harshly criticize AKP's excesses, his party's criticisms are far less likely to gain purchase with the masses. He and other CHP contacts also doggedly refuse to define CHP success in any terms other than lack of success for AKP, with the nation-wide percentage AKP would need to declare success steadily rising to near 50 percent, a highly unlikely number even in the best of circumstances.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) So far, CHP's campaign has been sluggish and lackluster, reflecting the result of twenty years of stifling, uninspiring leadership. If the CHP comes out of its corner with fiery rhetoric and a tangible program that would simultaneously co-opt AKP reforms while promising cleaner, fairer, and more trustworthy implementation, there might be some resonance among the people. But CHP hasn't come out of its corner yet, and hasn't committed to even beginning its campaign in earnest, ceding the early political ground to AKP. Without laying the ground for the public to begin to consider them in new light, CHP will have a difficult time convincing the voters that their campaign positions are genuine and earnest, meaning that CHP may peak too late to seriously pose a challenge in the local

ANKARA 00000323 003 OF 003

elections. That Deniz Baykal defines his party's success in terms of AKP "failure" and denies any capability to mold public opinion is discouraging, since it makes the prospect of a truly robust democracy in Turkey that much more remote. So far, it appears unlikely that CHP will wake up to the fact that it is still on the path to yet another in a long line of electoral losses.

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turkey>

Jeffrey